

THE
MOSBY
CREEK
CHRONICLES



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CHAPTER NINETEEN



Lord, Have Mercy...

Jeremiah 1:4-10:Luke 13:-10-17

People in Mossy Creek are hardworking, blue-collar folks. Jobs are hard to come by, so people hang on to them forever. That's why they're fiercely loyal to the people they work for. But some of them get just plain fierce when they get to drinking at the end of a tough week. And that's how it happens. That's how some hardworking people turn into hard-drinking people. It can happen in the blink of an eye. But sometimes the folks who start down that road have a tough time finding their way back.

And that's why Mossy Creek has a couple of AA meetings a week. And like most towns, they meet in churches. Some people like AA. Usually it's because somebody in their family got the help they needed just when they needed it the most. And some people don't like AA. The way they see it, if you have a drinking problem, you have a personal problem you should straighten out on your own. Of course, plenty of folks don't think much about AA one way or the other. But if you see cars at Our Savior Presbyterian Church on a Friday night, there is an AA meeting going on.

How about the car in the parking lot at 7:30 on Monday mornings? That belongs to Pastor Marianne. She likes to come to work early and kinda ease into the day. But easy takes off when somebody shows up in your office just as early with an idea that will get some folks all riled up. And that's how it happened. Just about the time summer was winding down and Pastor Marianne was looking forward to one more summer Monday morning, Clinton showed up with an idea.

He pulled up a chair and asked Pastor Marianne what she would think of a Sunday morning AA meeting. Now that's something you don't hear about every day. The way he explained it, there was a young woman who needed to be in a meeting. She even wanted to come. But she was single mom and needed to work. Like most people at Our Savior Presbyterian Church, Pastor Marianne liked Clinton. He was a good man who was beating the bottle. So she was paying close attention to everything he was saying, but she was also thinking, "Lord, have mercy!"

Clinton said, "I know not everybody's gonna like this. But she's workin' five days a week in Lexington and at the Piggly Wiggly on Saturdays. She's in pretty fair shape right now. But she feels like she needs to come to a meetin' to stay that way. Problem is, with her work schedule she just can't get to our meetin' or the other one, either. We got to thinkin' that if we met in the basement on Sunday morning, her two young uns could come to Sunday school while she was in the meetin'. After the meetin' they could all go to church. We were thinkin' that might be a pretty fair idea."

Pastor Marianne could see Clinton had thought his way through this. But the way most folks saw it, she was responsible for everything that went on at church on Sunday mornings. And some of those people would never sit still for an AA meeting on Sunday morning. She said, "Clinton, I like the idea in theory. But you're right; not everybody is going to like it. Fact is, some people are going to hate it. But I'll take it to the session for you. That's about the best I can do right now. Let's see what the elders say, and we'll go from there." Clinton said he understood, thanked her and left.

Well, sir, Pastor Marianne was good to her word. She took Clinton's idea to the session. After she explained what he had in mind, you could almost hear the dust settling on the carpet. The elders are good people, no doubt about it. But they could see some folks getting all lathered up if they did anything that took away from Sunday school and worship. At first they wanted more details. Then there was some polite hemming and hawing. Finally, one of the elders, Joe Bledsoe muttered, "Lord, have mercy!" After that, they were off to the races.

Joe's friends call him Joe B. He says he has never gotten liquored up in his life. So he doesn't think anybody else should either. And he has never been all that keen on AA in the first place. But an AA meeting on Sunday morning? That wasn't going to happen if he had anything to do with it. He said, "If she wants to change her life, she should change jobs and go to one of those meetings during the week." Well, everybody knows you just don't haul off and change jobs like that. When nobody said anything, he kept right on going. "And our Sunday school isn't some kind of child care for AA. If she wants to come to Sunday school and church, that's fine by me. But Sunday's the Lord's Day, and it isn't supposed to be for anything else." Then he looked down at the table and asked, "What kind of mother lets herself get into that kind of shape? I just don't see how this is our problem. She just needs to straighten up and fly right."

By that time, Pastor Marianne had collected her thoughts. "Joe B., I understand what you're saying, but here are a couple of things we ought to keep in mind. First, alcoholism is a disease; it isn't a moral failing. I know how tough this is for you. It's tough for me, too. But not helping someone who needs it? Sometimes doing nothing ends up being a sin. We have a Christian responsibility to do for others what we hope they would do for us. Having an AA meeting here on Sunday mornings will be a stretch for all of us, no doubt about it. But it will also give us a chance to reach out to somebody who needs our help, and that's always good ministry." Well, that uncomfortable silence started settling over the room again. And just about the time nobody could stand it much

longer, Corrina asked, “What does the Bible have to say about something like this?”

Pastor Marianne paused for a minute and then said, “There’s a passage in Luke that’s a little bit like this situation. There is a woman who hasn’t been able to stand up straight for eighteen years. We don’t know what her problem is. She just can’t straighten up on her own. It’s almost like she can’t bring herself to look anybody in the eye. Then Jesus heals her without her even asking. But He does it on the Sabbath. And the leader of the synagogue jumps all over Him for violating the Sabbath. Luke might be making the point that Jesus chooses mercy over keeping the Sabbath laws.” She paused and said, “You know, I’ve always felt kind of sorry for the leader of the synagogue. He wasn’t that much different from us. He was responsible for explaining the rules that govern worship and trying to get everybody to follow them.”

Joe B. said, “I’m not one to question the Lord, but it seems to me if that woman had been that bad off for eighteen years, she coulda waited for Him to help her. I don’t see where one more day woulda made any difference.” Pastor Marianne nodded her head and said, “That’s about what the synagogue leader said. But Jesus asked the crowd how many of them didn’t take care of their animals on the Sabbath. Well, you know the answer to that one. He said taking care of the woman’s health was more important than that. Treating cattle better than human beings—it’s hard to argue with Him on that.”

Corrina said, “I don’t think Jesus is breaking the law. Isn’t He just adjusting the Sabbath laws this one time to help that woman? It’s almost like

He's reinterpreting the law." Pastor Marianne nodded her head and said, "Good point." Joe B. didn't look up when he said, "Bein' crippled up or sick or whatever was wrong with that woman and bein' a drunk are two different things. This woman who wants to go to AA doesn't need our help to get straight. She just needs to help herself by making better choices. Some people say AA's a good thing. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. But they don't need to be meeting here on Sunday mornings. If we start changin' the rules every time something like this comes up, there's no tellin' where we'll end up."

Well, I know what you're thinking. I'd be thinking the same thing. Pastors will do just about anything to avoid scrapping with church members. Maybe Joe B. was thinking that, too. But Pastor Marianne wasn't backing down. She said, "Joe B. I get what you're saying. And I agree with you for the most part. Sunday is important. And worship is the most important thing we do. But the church is the body of Christ. When Jesus is reaching out to heal people now, He is doing that through us. What we do on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock is one kind of worship. But so is helping people the rest of the week. When we reach out and touch sick people, our lives turn into worship. We're honoring God by being what He made us to be. And when we help other Christians, we're helping family. My sermons on Sunday mornings won't mean much if we don't practice what I preach during the week."

Joe B. fired back, "Good preachin' ain't nothin' but puttin' the facts of the Gospel so people can understand 'em. Knowin' is believin' and that's what the Lord wants from us. And the Lord chose you to do that. That's your callin'. I

don't see where any of this mess we're talkin' about has a single thing to do with learnin' more about the Lord."

Pastor Marianne nodded her head and said, "You're right. I have a calling. I'm a little bit like Jeremiah that way. Remember what God tells him? 'Whenever I have something to say to the people of Israel, you're going to be My spokesman.' But that isn't all. He also tells Jeremiah he will be saying things that pull up and tear down. After that he will start all over again by building and planting. What pastors have to say isn't always easy to hear. I hope that what I have to say is something God wants you to hear. But Sunday mornings aren't the only times we speak on God's behalf. And this is starting to feel like one of those times. If we're going to model God's grace, we may have to make some tough choices and change the way we do things once in a while. Just look at the AA group. They're changing the way they do things just to help one person. It's exactly what Jesus did for the woman He healed. If we let AA meet here on Sunday mornings, that might be something new the Lord wants us to do. Only time will tell, but I doubt that it will hurt us, and it might even do us some good."

Well, as you might imagine, it wasn't an easy decision, but the session ended up letting AA meet in the church basement on Sunday mornings. Pastor Marianne called Clinton later that evening and let him know. She told him the session wanted him to invite everyone in the group to attend worship every Sunday. He said he would let the group know. He was pretty sure they would agree. He thanked her for helping out. And then he said, "The woman we're trying to help wants to meet you. But she isn't up to it yet. I don't know what the

hang-up is. It's like she wants to see you but she just can't do it. But this might help her get over that and come see you."

That Sunday was a tough one for Pastor Marianne. Sometimes it's hard work working for the Lord. Some people came up and thanked her. Others went out of their way to avoid her. During the week she had decided to preach that passage where Jesus healed the woman who couldn't stand up straight. In her sermon she talked about how important the Sabbath and worship were. She said worship was the most important thing the church ever does. And she said she felt for the synagogue leader, she really did. He was likely a good man in a bad spot. He probably thought he was trying to do the right thing for the right reason.

But it wasn't long before she said what Jesus did was grace, just pure grace. Healing that woman was an unexpected gift that came at the most unexpected time. She got what she never asked for. She got a brand new life on a day when she was probably expecting to be put off. But Pastor Marianne said what Jesus did was enact the Gospel. He ended up preaching a sermon everybody could see and understand. Well, sir, Pastor Marianne had herself quite the sermon that morning. Then it happened. Just about the time people thought they saw the end in sight, she quit using her notes.

She said, "Doing the right thing can be really hard. We'll struggle to do the right thing for the right reason as long as we're alive. It's odd, but we're forgiven and sinners all at the same time. And being afraid to do the right thing is one of the sins we wrestle with most. We're afraid of living in a world that looks like it's

out of control a lot of the time. And it doesn't take much for our fears to turn into anger. But we're afraid for all the wrong reasons. Alcoholism isn't contagious. But the way Jesus loves people? That is contagious. People just love being amazed by grace. Who doesn't want to experience unconditional love no matter what they're going through? We keep coming here on Sunday mornings to hear the Good News and celebrate God's grace. And this is grace: The Lord has chosen to have mercy on us for reasons we'll never fully understand. Before Jesus healed us, we couldn't look God in the eye. But now we can't wait to meet the Lord face to face. How could we get the gift of grace and experience Jesus' healing touch in our own lives and do nothing? That's why worship on Sunday morning is just the beginning. When we leave here to share God's grace with others, we're leaving here to worship in another way in another place."

After church, Pastor Marianne was greeting people in the church's front yard. One of the last people she visited with was a young woman in a plain cotton dress and short brown hair. Two children were holding her hands. They were hardworking hands. Pastor Marianne had noticed her and her children during worship but had never seen them before. After she introduced herself and her children, the young woman said, "I liked your sermon. I think you were right about gettin' and givin' grace."

Pastor Marianne thanked her and asked her children "Did you like Sunday school?" Well, Lord, you would've thought she asked them what they thought about Christmas they were so excited. Then she asked their mother, "Did you have a chance to go to one of our adult classes?" The young woman smiled and

said, "No. I was in the AA meeting during Sunday school. Like I said, what I like best about this church is the way you get and give grace. I just want you to know that. I'm much obliged." Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "I hope you'll come back next week." The young woman looked her right in the eye, smiled and said, "Hope? Lord, have mercy. From the moment I get here until I leave, it's almost like I can feel the Lord's touching me. I wouldn't miss being here on Sunday morning for anything."

